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DOSTOIEVSKY'S MYSTICAL TERROR

BY CHARLES GRAY SHAW

IT is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God, but that is what happened to Fyodor Dostoevsky. It was not Russia, vast, fantastic, terrible, but real existence as such which wrung from his soul his tales of self-inquisition. "Reality has caught me upon a hook"; this chance expression in one of his romances of reality is the confessed secret of the anguished author. Dostoevsky is Russia, and "the Russian soul is a dark place." Having said this of his own land, Dostoevsky, without playing upon Amiel's pretty epigram, "the landscape is a state of the soul," proceeds to show us how the outer darkness pervades his own soul. He knows not why, but at dusk there comes over him an oppressive and agonizing state of mind difficult to define, but recognizable in the form of "mystical terror." Because of his pessimistic realism, Dostoevsky is not to be understood by any attempt to force his stubborn thought into the pens of conventional literature; "standard authors" afford us no analogies, so that it is only by relating the Russian to Job, Ezekiel, and the author of the Apocalypse that we are able to make headway in reading Dostoevsky. Hoffmann, Poe, and Baudelaire played with the terrible as a boy plays with toy spiders and snakes; but their soul-states knew no Siberias, their mental hides escaped the hooks of reality.

With the several volumes of Dostoevsky weighing one's book-shelves down or with the ponderous pages spread out before perplexed eyes, the reader cannot comprehend Dostoevsky as artist unless the reader is prepared to look upon art as absolute. Style is swallowed up in significance, technique surrenders to subject; for the story *is* something, not about something. As architecture and music are arts which refuse to represent something other than themselves,

but are real and representative together, so the art of Dostoevsky, instead of being pictorial and imitative, is so much reality spread out before one's gaze. The idea becomes fact, the mental solidifies, and that which is said is no more, no less, than that which took place. The story is a stream which carries river-bank and river-bed along with it, while huge cakes of reality float upon the surface. Some of this Russian realism Dostoevsky learned from Gogol, and, like many another ardent Slav, he beheld the troika of Russia speeding its nocturnal way like a thunderbolt from Heaven upon some mad mission of God. But Dostoevsky had no one to guide him when in his Slavonic demonism he turned "Russian" into an adjective capable of qualifying things most absolute. In this spirit, he speaks of "Russian sympathy" as if to suggest that the human heart has resources of compassion which man outside Russia has not been permitted to feel. Only the Russian nation is "god-bearing"; in such a land alone may one say, "an atheist can't be a Russian." In his egregious zeal for the Slavonic mood, Dostoevsky goes so far as to speak of "the Russian God," who, he admits, is in danger of being overcome by cheap vodka.

It is imperative to consider Dostoevsky's art from an intensive standpoint as so much psychology, but a psychology which would strain one of our modern laboratories, while its Russian aspects would disconcert what is popularly known as "sociology." The Russian writer chooses to style it "double-edged psychology," whose methods of analysis are so painful to the subject that he cries out, "Don't rummage in my soul; cursed be all those who pry into the human heart." Dostoevsky's fascinating fear of psychology was probably due to the fact that his most precious moments of introspection were enjoyed in connection with his experiences as an epileptic. In the midst of his mystical terror, the spirit rends his soul, while he screams as though another person were crying out within his own soul. Nevertheless, this epileptic experience has its heights of transfiguration, since the sufferer with his "special, sudden idea" is able to behold the "highest synthesis of life." Entering in true Russian fashion, without knocking, Reality informs him that such an exalted moment is worth one's whole life, while it further conveys the tidings that, after all, the whole world is lovely, like trees, flowers,

and children. Reduced to exact formulation, as though a moral maxim were concealed in that which is epileptic and existential, this real moment persuades the sufferer that "compassion is the only law of human existence," just as it gives him apocalyptic assurance that time shall be no more. This eternal love of All comes in blinding flashes, but from the tangled light-rays he weaves a web of moral and religious meaning.

However vague and disconnected the soul-states of Dostoevsky may appear, it is doubtful whether his readers can deny that they are wholly free from such "special, sudden ideas." In practically every mind, no matter how much common sense there may be, there are occasional whirlpools and explosions which show how untamed are human ideas and impulses. At heart, all tend to feel somewhat of Dostoevsky's mystic terror, even when they have the mystical tendencies and their better natures pretty well under control. As an exceptional psychologist of the dark Russian soul, Dostoevsky is fond of rearing unexpected islands in the stream of consciousness. Every plan for the murder carefully made, Raskolnikov, the hero in *Crime and Punishment*, lies down to wait for the coming of the necessary darkness. The resolution to kill his victim has been forged; the hatchet is by his side. Now, in this moment of waiting, he is as it were in Egypt on some palm-dotted oasis; camel and caravan rest quietly, man and beast drink alike from the murmuring stream as it flows over the many-colored stones and golden spangles of the sandy bottom. Between the idea of diabolical preparation and the impulse which leads to the bloody execution of his plan does this remote and charming picture pass in the mind of the murderer. Another example of unexpected abstraction occurs in *The Idiot*, where Lebedev, the money lender, who is just bereft of his wife, spends the night upon his knees, but praying for the repose of the Countess Du Barry's soul. Dmitri Karamazov, about to leap from the darkness and murder his father, notes with great care how the light from the window of the paternal mansion intensifies the red of the berries upon the near-by bush; in the criminal court where he undergoes searching examination, he is fascinated by the amethyst in the prosecutor's ring. Instead of following a scientific psychology, which would make the soul-state a mere appendage to the event in nature, Dostoevsky is

persuaded that consciousness has tides which rise and fall in response to an unearthly influence.

Two general principles seem to guide Dostoevsky's contemplation of life: one is anthropological in its attempt to define man and place him in a habitat; the other is racial, and seeks to analyze the Russian soul. As an anthropologist, Dostoevsky refuses to subsume man under the genus homo, just as he is unwilling to assign him to earth as his home. "Man," said Pascal, "is neither beast nor angel—*ni bête, ni ange*." According to Dostoevsky's calculation, *man is either beast or angel*, since he is never merely man; or, to use his own language, man is a "diamond set in the dirty background of life." Wholly wanting in Laodicean conceptions of life, the artist prefers to regard man in Gadarean fashion, a beast demonized from without. "It has always been a mystery to me," says he, "and I have marvelled a thousand times at that faculty in man (and in the Russian, I believe, more especially) of cherishing in his soul his loftiest ideal side by side with the most abject baseness, and all quite sincerely." In his mystic intuition of life, Dostoevsky could behold nothing between the black, barren earth and the endless shining of the sky; from which follows the fact that, as he says, "the man with the ideal of Sodom in his soul does not renounce the ideal of the Madonna." The climax of this crass view occurs in the clever but unhappy twist given to the words of the Latin humanist: *Satan sum et nihil humani me alienum puto*.

The anthropology which makes of man a beast-angel is accompanied by an exalted sociology which makes of Russia a peculiar blending of Tartar and Buddhist. With the Russian, there is no such thing as mere living; man must either assert or deny the will to live. For this reason, the interpretation of Dostoevsky must be carried on in the courts of a super-psychology and a major morality; if the reader clings to his traditional ideas of man as a creature of common consciousness and proper morality, he will soon be floundering in the flotsam of Dostoevsky's turbid soul-stuff. Schiller, whom he admired, looked upon man as a chemical combination of sense and reason finely synthesized through æsthetic education; but Dostoevsky himself can concoct no plan suitable for uniting the Tartar beast with the Buddhist angel; hence, he says of his Russian, '*Grattex le russe et vous verrez le tartare*.' Catalogue the characters

which move about in the romances of this Slavonic apostle, and you will find, never a human being, but always an animal or an angel. Out of such a social appreciation of his own race, he extracts an opposed pair of moral categories wholly distinct from the ethical presumptions of extra-Russian moralists; they are those of strength and weakness, of super-strength which makes man worse than bad, of victorious weakness which makes the man better than the good.

Enthralled by the idea of a super-strong consciousness which turns human blood to lava or molten iron, Dostoevsky makes Milton's Satan and Nietzsche's blond beast appear quite amateurish and unconvincing; the strong Slav is a reality in the artistic experience of the writer. "Strong natures," says he, "often find it difficult to bear the burden of their strength." Prominent among these strong ones is Raskolnikov, who raises his nervous will to the n^{th} power of human volition; strictly speaking, Raskolnikov has no will, but a volition-channel through which the vicious assertiveness of the Tartar rushes like a spring freshet. The most systematic treatment of undue strength is found in *The Brothers Karamazov*, which celebrates the "primitive force of the Karamazovs, a crude, unbridled earth-force, a thirst for life regardless of everything." Other nations, he tells us, may have their Hamlets, but the Russians have their Karamazovs. Dostoevsky's strong one turns to crime to cleanse his soul of the sense of power whose superabundance has become a burden to him. In this spirit, Rogozhin, in *The Idiot*, with a garden-knife slays a family of six for the sake of killing them, from which act of disinterested deviltry he turns to the murder of his beautiful bride. Prince Harry, in *The Possessed*, that Gadarean swine story, bites off the ear of the old count who in his deafness is trying to hear what the youth has to say. Famous among Dostoevsky's tales of terror is that of the two peasants who go to bed in the same room, whereupon one cuts the other's throat because of the silver watch which his friend carries, although the murderer has neither need of nor desire for the time-piece. To make the matter still more unearthly, the artist assures us that the foul act was accompanied by a fervid prayer on the part of the bloodthirsty man, who ejaculates, "God, forgive me for Christ's sake." Again, a young girl reads the story of a Jew who, having cut off

the fingers of a child, crucifies it with no regret save that the Golgothan period of the child's suffering was limited to a paltry four hours. Not content with absorbing this touch of Sadism, the fair maid often imagines that she herself is the Jew, while she adds a personal touch to the story by expressing the idea that, had she done the deed, she should want to sit by the cross "*eating pineapple compote.*" According to Dostoevsky's amiable psychology of strength, everybody loves crime, just as everybody in the Karamazov community loved Dmitri, who was believed to have killed his father. To such a murderous major premise, the artist adds a minor one to the effect that, as a matter of fact, one always wants to kill one's father. Astounded as one may well be by such tales and such interpretations, one should consider that the news which keeps journalism alive is habitually pessimistic, since it is made up of columns of human sin and human sorrow, just as one may recall the further fact that the Man of the Evangel warned His disciples that out of the heart of man come such things as wickedness, deceit, foolishness, murder.

Side by side with such frank frightfulness, for which even the German U-boat fleet can hardly prepare us, Dostoevsky loves to place accompanying tales of excessive want and extravagant self-abasement. From tropic to poles his art passes without literary inconsistency. In his hands, the story shifts from the Slavonic to the Sanskrit, while a word from him turns the Cossack into a Buddhist. Meanwhile, we are kept wondering just when man in the European and American sense will make his appearance. The underlying philosophy of Dostoevsky puzzles the eyes of reading-room and magazine-people, because this philosophy puts the negation of life upon a par with life-assertion. "The law of self-preservation and the law of self-destruction," says he, "are equally strong in humanity." Thus the Hindu becomes the match for the Tartar, while the Buddhist hypnotizes the Cossack. Walking side by side with the ferocious characters and enjoying their crimson confidence too are so many gentle souls whose sense of want and whose capacity for compassion make them strange bed-fellows. Prominent among these amateur angels appear Vanya, in *Injured and Insulted*, Prince Myshkin, the "idiot," and Alesha, of the family Karamazov. With such, the need of negation and the nostalgia for the Nought

expresses itself quite frankly in connection with suicide as a fine art. Self-destruction is not at all uncommon; fear of dishonor, disappointed love, and even the high cost of living instruct the coroner in his search for causes. However, Shakespeare and Schopenhauer have indulged in the casuistry of self-destruction, so that suicide is a topic about which we are, as it were, pretty well informed. But, according to Dostoevsky, no one has a right to take his life for a cause; if there must be suicide, it must be for no reason at all. In this manner, Kraft, in *Injured and Insulted*, takes his own precious and promising life, because the science of craniology and anthropology have led him to the conclusion that the Russians are a second-rate race, so that to live as a Russian is not worth while. The young consumptive in *The Idiot* contemplates but does not consummate suicide, not because of his malady, but simply because the spectacle of life appears in itself repulsive. Stavrogin, in *The Possessed*, is perfectly willing to slip the noose about his neck, but fears that such a display of courage may create the impression of a soul-greatness which he did not possess. Kirollov, the practical and successful man of affairs, is anxious to take his useful life simply because he has no reason for so doing. "The highest point of self-will," so he argues, "is to kill myself with my own hands. To do this without any cause at all I shall be the only one." For himself, Dostoevsky concludes that life is at its best when its tides are at their lowest ebb, its colors of an infra-red tint. The best man is the least of men, a kind of idiot who possesses just enough volition and ideation to continue diplomatic relations with life. Good and bad, life and death are one; at the same time, all souls are open to the one world; the endless publicity of Siberian existence had taught Dostoevsky that bitter lesson. "In truth," he says, "we are each responsible for all, and it's only men who don't know this. If they did, the earth would be a paradise at once." This oneness of human life on earth is the source of the artist's sympathism; all may be walled in, but there are no separating partitions. Sorrow is sacred, hence the monk, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, bows in reverence before the suffering in store for the young villain. More striking and better known than this episode is the incident in *Crime and Punishment* where Raskolnikov kisses the feet of the despised street-girl, and says, "I do

not bow down to you personally, but to suffering humanity in your person." Such a text is the essence of the Russian novel.

Dostoevsky's theology is neither the latitudinarianism of Berlin nor the anthropomorphism of the Kaiser. Instead of accepting the idea of God, he finds no possible way of rejecting the notion. The Psalmist admitted that the fool might say, *non est deus*, even when he did not think it; but Dostoevsky cannot admit the possibility of the atheistic *dixit*. The atheist, he thinks, "will always be talking about something else." Like his favorite character, Alesha Karamazov, Dostoevsky seems to say, "I am not rebelling against God; I simply don't accept his world." Dostoevsky's rejection of the world is due to the pessimistic perception that the planet is the place of disorder, which fact makes possible the art of the Russian, even when his æsthetic capitalization of the cosmic chaos is not quite the same as that of the munition-maker's. That which gave Dostoevsky his deepest wound was the thought that, when the Man appeared, the earth had no place for Him except Golgotha. It was indeed for the sake of the Man that all things were made, and without Him all were madness; yet the fact that the laws of the planet did not spare Him proves that "the very laws of the planet are a lie, and the vaudeville of Devils." There are places in the art of Thomas Hardy where the condemnation of the planet is no less strident; but Hardy proceeds to his bitter conclusions in a spirit less tender and less evangelical. Of the Russian it may be said that this is perhaps the only place in his æsthetic system where the mystic becomes malicious; even here his indignation assumes no more threatening an aspect than that of the "suffering smile."

If atheists are always talking about something else than the Deity whose existence they would deny, Dostoevsky showed his willingness to listen to their rash utterances; it was as a mere listener at Fourier meetings that he was condemned and exiled. These atheists who pour henbane into the ear seem to have reduced the cosmic proportions of the Deity until God became little more than a magnified Man, and as such an undesirable citizen. Much of this fervent anthropomorphism may be traced to the Hegelianism of Feuerbach and others whom nihilists like Turgenev had studied in Germany; some of it was elaborated upon a quasi-

political basis, as if God were a sort of Czar. This "god," so Dostoevsky hears, is to be deposed and exiled; "then they will divide history into two parts: from the gorilla to the annihilation of God, and from the annihilation of God to the transformation of the earth and of man." Convinced that atheism cannot be fact, thought, or even word, Dostoevsky further has compassion for "God," as for all other unfortunates. In this spirit, he makes the convict say, "If they drive God from earth, we will shelter Him underground; and then we men underground will sing from the bowels of earth a glorious hymn to God." In general, Dostoevsky's art is a subterranean song, his religion the bowels of cosmic compassion. God torments him with inner calamities as He used to torment the patriarch Job, but Dostoevsky still trusts; the world seems like the Devil's vaudeville, yet he stoops to kiss the black earth. Man is naked and a beggar rejected by both heaven and earth, but man may walk in the light, and while he *is* nothing he may see everything.

It was Dostoevsky's fate to be possessed of a primitive and patriarchal spirit and be called upon to display this in an age of industry. Place him in the world when creation was fresh and when the newest winds of Heaven fanned faces not yet furrowed by doubt and care, and your Dostoevsky had been fit and ready to join Enoch as he walked with God. But, finding himself in a world where economic systems have become superior to things and men, Dostoevsky could not help invoking the spirit of nihilism, even when he repudiated nihilistic politics as such. Confronted by the spectacle of his Russia engaged in industrial activity, Dostoevsky can only condemn business and rejoice in the fact that there are so few practical men in Russia. In the midst of an animated discussion on the subject of railways as the saviours of Russia, Dostoevsky allows his 'idiot' to lisp something to this effect: "I believe that beauty will save the world."

Along with this spiritual nihilism which condemns the railway as a soteriological principle goes Dostoevsky's repudiation of science. He feels that science is selfish and tends to forbid pity, whence it will be folly to put one's trust in its princes, just as Gorky admitted that science was a divine beverage, but that up to the present time it resembled Russian vodka, in that its ultimate yield was noth-

ing but headache. "Science," says Dostoevsky, "has ever given the solution by the fist. This is particularly characteristic of the half-truths of science, the most terrible scourge of humanity, unknown until the last (eighteenth) century, and worse than plague, famine, or war." Science, he believes, could not exist were it not for beauty, while the contrast between the æsthetical and the scientific makes it possible for one to conclude that "Shakespeare is better than boots, Raphael greater than petroleum, the Sistine Madonna finer than a pencil." The Russian God may have survived the emancipation of the serfs, but it is a question whether He can stand out against the railways.

Such epileptic exaggerations are more likely to occasion a smile than to cause wrath, but it cannot be denied that there is in them the implicit criticism of a philosophy which the thoughtful and semi-thoughtful person of the day carries around with him. All such philosophers are interested in the exterior perfection of humanity as this is to be found in the proper assembling and organizing of the sons of men, just as they are mildly concerned about the elaboration of an inner and intensive humanism as this is to appear in their own individual hearts. This is, of course, bourgeois, but better than nothing; it sprouts up in labor-unions, in charity organizations here, in free libraries and women's clubs there. Now, can we deny that our creeds begin with, 'I believe in railways'? Our freight-rebates and eight-hour-per-day strikes may distill some doubt about our new god, but the Apostles worried along with the bag-holding Judas, and we ought to be able to pull through in spite of our modern men from Kerioth. Adam Smith and Herbert Spencer have formulated our new creeds for us, so that we are beginning to feel quite at home in our new temples, which like some new railway stations resemble the old Dorics and Gothics. Dostoevsky may not have found the integrating principle which shall not only bring men together, but persuade them that they belong together, but he has been of some service in showing us that our hope in horses and chariots, in steel cars and automobiles, is a vain and far-fetched consolation.

As to the terrified mystic himself, the reader of his unique works may close the several volumes with the conviction that, no matter what science may say about him, no matter what society may do to him, man exists. There must

be some better way of describing the freedom of man in the world than to do as Dostoevsky and Gorky do when they liken the present aimlessness of human life to the meanderings of a "cockroach." There must be some superior way of evincing the spiritual character of man's inner self, so that one will no longer need to follow Dostoevsky through all the perturbed ramifications of the stricken soul. While this philosophy of man is being elaborated, we may keep in mind Dostoevsky's idea that man, far from being a brick in the industrial wall or a cell in the social organism, is an inner world-order, fantastic, terrible, yet beautiful. . . . According to the words of the apostle Jude, "Of some have compassion, making a difference." Dostoevsky was "different."

CHARLES GRAY SHAW.